

**Limit Setting**  
**In the Midst of Illness or Loss in the Family**  
Wonders and Worries, Inc.

**Step I. Recognize the Importance of your Child's Environment:  
Predict, Prevent, and Prepare**

- Be aware of your child's sleeping and eating cycles
  - Children who are tired or hungry will have much greater difficulty coping with their emotions and controlling their behavior.
  - Be consistent with bed times and provide healthy food (and ask others caring for your children to do the same).
  
- Develop a routine
  - If it is not possible to be consistent with a routine then prepare your child for changes ahead of time.
  - Have a plan for who would step in if you are unexpectedly unavailable—let your child know your plan.
  
- Adjust your expectations
  - Your child may already be utilizing all of his/her energy to cope. Be aware that any additional stress, no matter how small it may seem to you, may cause emotional outbursts or behavior changes.
  - Use an empathetic response FIRST before setting a limit or enforcing a consequence.
  
- Determine what behaviors are always unacceptable to you
  - Save your energy, focus only on those behaviors that are a priority to you and most problematic for your child.
  - Allow some behaviors to go without setting limits (if they are not a priority); acknowledge the positive behaviors and ignore the negative.
  
- Prepare your child for any new or different environments or experiences
  - Give your child information about what to expect and what is expected of him/her (how to behave appropriately) prior to a new experience.
  - Specific information including what your child will see, what is expected to happen, what he/she should and should not do is very helpful.

## Step II. Set Limits Clearly and Consistently using the A.C.T. Process

### 1. Acknowledge the FEELING.

- “You are really angry...”
- “I can see that you are very frustrated...”
- “You are really feeling sad right now...”
- “You would really like my attention right now...”

### 2. Communicate the LIMIT:

- “but I am not for hitting.”
- “but the door is not for kicking.”
- “however it is time to sit at the table for dinner.”
- “but my shirt is not for pulling on.”

### 3. Target an ALTERNATIVE (with a choice):

- “You can decide to hit the pillow or rip up the magazine.”
- “You can choose to stomp on the egg cartons or go outside and hit the tree with the stick.”
- “You can let me know if you need 5 more minutes or if you are ready to come to the table now.”
- “You can choose to hold my hand or sit in the chair until I am done talking to \_\_\_\_\_.”

### **REPEAT, REPEAT, REPEAT!!!**

- If you forget to acknowledge the feeling, GO BACK and recognize it.  
If you first say, “I am not for hitting, you can decide to hit the pillow or rip up the magazine.”  
Then say, “I can see you are really angry and feel like hitting but...”
- After the 3-step process, DON’T discuss.  
“I know you would like to discuss this some more but I’ve already answered that question and given you the choices.”  
“I’ve answered that question once (twice) and that’s enough.”
- If your child asks you a question that you are not prepared to answer (you want to think about it, get more information, talk it over with someone):  
“I can’t answer that question now because...”  
I will answer that question for you at (give a specific time)”  
If your child begins nagging:  
“If you must have an answer now, the answer will have to be no.”

Adapted from Child Parent Relationship Therapy (CPRT) Treatment Manual: A 10-Session Filial Therapy Model for Training Parents, by Bratton, S., Landreth, G., Kellam, T., & Blackard, S.R. (2006). New York: Routledge.

### Step III. Give Choices with Clear and Enforceable Consequences

1. Use Choice Giving with Consequences if the A.C.T. process has not been effective in stopping behavior.
  - “If you choose to hit me then you choose to sit in your room. If you choose not to hit me then you choose to get to stay on my lap.”
  - “If you choose to kick the door again then you choose to lose TV tonight. If you choose not to kick the door then you choose to get to watch TV.”
  - “If you choose to come to the table now then you choose to have desert. If you choose to not come to the table now then you choose to eat dinner later and not have desert.”
  - “If you choose to interrupt then you choose not to stop for ice cream. If you choose not to interrupt then you choose to get to have ice cream.”
  - Follow all of these with the question: “Which do you choose?”
2. Use Choice Giving with Consequences for problematic behaviors that you have determined are a priority for changing.
  - “If you choose to use profanity then you choose to give up your (video game, TV, phone privileges...) for the day. If you choose to express your frustration respectfully, without profanity, then you choose to get to (play video games, watch TV, talk on the phone) for the day.”
  - “If you choose not to complete your chores by 8:00 pm then you choose to help me by vacuuming tomorrow. If you choose to complete your chores by 8:00 pm then you choose to relax tomorrow.”
3. Use Choice Giving for upcoming situations so that expectations are clear
  - “If you choose to be home by 10:00 pm then you choose to go out with your friends again next weekend. If you choose not to be home by 10:00 pm then you choose not to go out with your friends next weekend.”
  - “If you choose to sit in your chair at the restaurant until you are excused then you choose to get to play on the playground. If you choose to get out of your chair (crawl under the table, run around the table) then you choose not to play on the playground.”
  - Be sure to use the words “If YOU CHOOSE” in order to place responsibility with your child (and not with you). NOT “If you don’t \_\_\_\_\_ then I will \_\_\_\_\_!”
  - Keep your emotions under control. Do not try to further teach or prove a point (“if you only would have \_\_\_\_\_”). Simply state, “I see you have chosen \_\_\_\_\_.”
  - Only focus on 1 to 3 behaviors at a time, do not overdo it.
  - Enforce consequences CONSISTENTLY.

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